

## Islam and Postmodernism: A study of Zia ud Din Sardar's Perspective

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### Abstract

Religions in general and Islam in particular has gone through different times and faced different challenges and questions during these phases. Hence like all other religions and cultures, Islam has also produced different scholars and intellectuals, in due process, who tried to answer the questions and come up with the solutions to the challenges posed to it in particular times. Sardar, one of the outspoken contemporary Muslim intellectuals, tried to redefine Islam in the context of postmodernism. His understanding of postmodernism is that 'it's a new kind of imperialism of western culture'. He considers it to be a new way of crushing the hopes and aspirations of people, and calls it a 'linear progression and a natural conclusion to modernity' it is a new way west has come up with to avoid resistance modernity faced by Islam, so criticising it severely as incompatible and hostile towards Islam.

**Key words:** .....

### Introduction:

The aim of this paper is to evaluate in detail Sardar's views on Islam and Postmodernism in the belief that this will help in deciding whether these two ideological frameworks are different or have any common grounds, whether a connectivity can be established between Islam and postmodernism and in turn may have any impact upon the development of the Muslim thought and worldview. Although Islam is a revealed religion dating from some 1400 years ago while postmodernism is a philosophical and cultural movement that began in recent times and has a contemporary intellectual history, however, in its critique of modernism, postmodernism has already engaged in a catalytic encounter with the underlying rationalist principles that sustain contemporary Islamic modernist thought.

A London-based scholar, Sardar is a British monolith who has lived the life of a scholar-adventurer travelling widely, visiting many countries in the Islamic world. He has extensively written about Islam and is an author of over 40 books. His intellectual predilections tend toward diversity, pluralism and dissenting perspectives, which together with his obvious ability mean she is especially qualified for rethinking Islam and the role of Muslims. Committed to rescue Islamic epistemology from tyrants and traditionalists, modernists and secularists, postmodernists and political opportunists alike, Sardar<sup>[1]</sup> is recognized as a key scholar of the modern time<sup>[2]</sup>.

"I am not like most Muslims. I do not see Islam as a set of rituals, a list of do's and don'ts, a code of rigid, unchanging regulations and laws. For me Islam is not just a religion; it is a worldview based on a matrix of values and concepts. These values provide a framework within which I seek answers to some questions that constantly agitate my existence...And this is what I do: I

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invariably strive in all my future work for both theoretical and practical answers to these questions.”

This frame of mind marks the set of published scholarly books, learned papers, essays and articles he has produced. His projects are mainly based on two key components: contemporization of the Muslim predicament in terms of intellectual approach, and the harmonization of Islamic thought with Western values. He supports Muslim norms and scrutinises all modern scientific ethos through the pre-set eye of a Muslim, mainly focussing on the needs and requirements of Muslims in the modern era. These needs ultimately are the foundation for our further discussion of the West, modernism and postmodernism<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **Sardar's thesis of Postmodernism:**

Sardar defines postmodernism as an alternative manner of dealing with the views of the oppressed non-Western world, marginalized by modernity. According to him, modernity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has suppressed all the non-Western cultures while focusing solely on the promotion of Western culture<sup>[4]</sup>. Modernity revolves exclusively around Western values, history and cultures; while in contrast postmodernity absorbs other histories, cultures and visions. Sardar argues that where, on the one hand, modernism looks down in a uniform manner on the non-Western bulk of humankind, postmodernism offers a uniform plane for analysis, allowing to be heard on the same platform voices which modernity excludes<sup>[5]</sup>. However, Sardar believes that while postmodernism is a form of dissent from modernity, its place is still situated within modernity, and it still promotes modernity.

Although Sardar is recognized as a postmodern thinker his position on postmodernism is that it is 'the new imperialism of western culture'. According to this understanding, postmodernism as it is practiced is a continuance of colonialism and modernity; the new postmodernism is nothing but another way to crush the hopes and aspirations of non-Western people. He explicitly contends that

“By pretending to give voice to the marginalised, postmodernism in fact undermines the histories, tradition, morality, religions and worldviews – everything that provides meaning and sense of direction to non-western cultures and societies. As such, postmodernism is a linear projection, a natural conclusion to modernity; and by privileging secularism it has become an arch ideology<sup>[6]</sup>.”

By construing postmodernity as a linear projection in this way, Sardar has tried to assert that postmodernism is nothing but a platform to re-exhibit the power game through apparent realignment of society. Postmodernism starts with opposition to what went before and moves towards a variegated description of secularism and its associated ideologies. It is no more than a means for Western secularists to encourage the transformation of non-Western traditions without resistance, whereas modernity has elicited strong resistance from people such as Muslims, Third World intellectuals and proponents of non-Western cultures, potentially eventuating in destructive outcomes for Western cultures and values. In fact modernists have transformed their views into postmodernism in order to control the level of such resistance<sup>[7]</sup>.

Sardar has also constructed an overview asserting that postmodernism's practitioners do not consider analytical scrutiny as vital, but discard all forms of truth-claims as for postmodernism there is nothing absolute. The two key values of Truth and Reason are not

valid for postmodernists since they rely on a range of knowledge sources with equal weighting. Instead postmodernism acts as a platform where the key sources of knowledge, imagination, fiction and narrative are viewed as equally good reflectors of human personality and behaviours<sup>[8]</sup>. Besides first principles, in which knowledge is held to be the source of truth, Sardar presents another principle that postmodernists uphold; they deny reality as an ultimate phenomenon. What comes across as reality for the people living in one era might be considered a non-real stance in another. In defining a postmodern perspective on reality, Sardar notes that in judging a situation, postmodernist practitioners take account of cultural and historic perceptions; scientific relativism offers greater understanding of such perceptions<sup>[9]</sup>.

A further principle of postmodernism as described by Sardar is simulacrum. According to this principle, there is no distinction between the image and material reality. The world and its surroundings are like a video game, the perception and understanding of which is based on glamorized manifestation. In other words, the reality of the world is exactly as people view it. Simulations, instead of reality, drive the life of the people living in this society. Thus, everything and everyone is covered in simulacrum. A concomitant of this is that postmodernism as a subject drowns all objects in an ocean of images<sup>[10]</sup>, in effect generating meaninglessness. Hence, these principles of postmodernism as described by Sardar arrive at the point of doubting everything, without setting down any specific theory, absolute idea, or faithful experience<sup>[11]</sup>. Postmodernism is connected with a range of multiplicities and does not privilege one set above another; the outcome is encouragement of a variety of types of features, cultures and realities<sup>[12]</sup>. The universality and uniformity of reality is not taken into account. Sardar believes that this complexity and complication is not novel: since the beginning of its existence, humanity has been mostly incapable of analysing complexities; relying on human imagination it has seen the world in disjointed fragments, fractures and disparate parts<sup>[13]</sup>.

### **Islam's position in the Postmodern era:**

Sardar's thesis on Islam stems from his critique of the traditional thinking about Islam which has been anchored by religious beliefs impervious to reform Muslim societies<sup>[14]</sup>. Critical and reflective thinking has no place or esteem in traditional and conservative Islam, which Sardar heavily criticises. His view is that the traditional Muslim thinkers and intellectuals have presented Islam and Islamic principles through the mode of unquestioning piety. Islamic thoughts and principles drive contemporary Islamic societies, and a need for change is not recognised in traditional Islam<sup>[15]</sup>. However, in the modern business environment, Western cultures have regarded change as a positive value. There has therefore been a large discrepancy between the dominant forces in traditional Islam and the change-oriented values of modern times. This means that any change in the fixed, prescribed Islamic principles can only come about through reasoning and sustained struggle for change. Through *ijtihad*, Muslim societies can allow other practices to enter into their conceptualisation<sup>[16]</sup>. Sardar takes on board how the Western world accounts for change through the methodology of science and technology. 'Science is all about problem solving, it has nothing to do with the soul. You may find spirituality in nature but that is not the same thing as studying nature to understand it laws'<sup>[17]</sup>. Accordingly, in the postmodern era Islam should offer Muslims the opportunity to rethink and reinvent their traditions<sup>[18]</sup>. A new culture or environment requires a new spirit to replace old traditions; for this reason, religions should allow a platform for criticism and self-criticism<sup>[19]</sup>.

In the postmodern era a religion like Islam should act as an interface connecting the past and future. However, the actual picture of Islam in the era of postmodernism is quite different: Muslims having cut themselves from the present are discouraged from engaging with an intense transformation of their traditions.

A strong need exists to rethink Islam. The reliance of Muslims on centuries-backed interpretations has prevented them moving beyond the boundaries of their comfort zone. Debate and discussion is overdue; new modes are required to help people understand the pressing need for alterations and modifications. The call for new *ijtihad* is therefore highly critical to the Islamic reformation, and in this context Sardar has reiterated the views of other notable thinkers, such as Afghani and Abduh<sup>[20]</sup>. Reconstruction of Muslim civilization requires changing the behaviours of narrow-minded Muslim intellectuals, both modernists and traditionalists, who place their focus on the religious teachings but are not concerned with reasoning and critical, strategic decisions. In contrast a 'critical Muslim' recognizes the necessity of modifying their positions based on the function of criticism. Muslim civilisation needs a complete overhaul in such areas as economic, educational, social and political behaviours<sup>[21]</sup>.

### **Compatibility between Islam and postmodernism:**

Sardar's modern views on Islam do not, however, lead to him into accepting recent trends in Western culture. For him there is no compatibility between Islam and postmodernism. Postmodernism as a continuity of modernity is identified as a dominant culture of the present time, which has affected almost all the cultures and sub-cultures of the world. It has attempted to embrace all aspects of human life from all angles while not allowing people to evaluate and examine the correctness of human affairs<sup>[22]</sup>. For Sardar, postmodernism though presented as a form of dissent from modernity, in fact is promoting modernity and making it much stronger, hence it is 'a new imperialism of western culture'. 'By pretending to give voice to the marginalised, postmodernism in fact undermines their histories, tradition, morality, religions and worldviews – everything that provides meaning and sense of direction to non-western cultures and societies. As such, postmodernism is a linear projection, a natural conclusion to modernity; and by privileging secularism it has become an arch ideology<sup>[23]</sup>.' He goes on to posit postmodernism's overriding concern with the demolition of grand narratives such as religion, tradition and history as detrimental to the very existence of the non-West for it is these very narratives that make the non-West what it is: not the West. The insistence that everything is without purpose and that nothing can give meaning and direction to our lives is a distinctively Western assumption that finds no echo whatsoever in non-Western cultures, societies and civilizations.

On the other hand Islam, for Sardar, is an integrative worldview, taking into consideration every aspect of society and providing it with a moral perspective. It does not present us with ready-made answers to individual problems but sets a moral framework to free human beings from all sorts of injustices and oppression. Therefore to see any compatibility between Islam and postmodernism is a contradiction in terms. Arguably, Sardar has rejected the possibility of examining Islam and postmodernism in a single society; his interpretations of Islam certainly have no compatibility with modernity. Postmodernism, which was generated to deal with the evils of modernity, according to Sardar, has turned out to be another representation of liberal secularism. In postmodernism Sardar discerns the existence of imperialistic tendencies, dehumanization, domination and meaninglessness, and so dismisses as incongruous any connection between Islam and postmodernism. Where

postmodernism drives human behaviours by rejection of dogmatism, Islam requires bringing about constructive changes through social and religious purification. Contrary to postmodernism, Islam allows Muslims to engage in a self-development process. Sardar proposes that the purpose of Muslim intellectuals is to identify their roles in manifesting Islam as a practical way of living in postmodern society. Their role is essential for accomplishing successful regeneration of Islam in the contemporary world<sup>[24]</sup>. From the outlined stance it follows that:

Islam is a metanarrative

Postmodernism harbours incredulity towards metanarratives. Therefore, postmodernism and Islam are mutually exclusive.

### **Transmodernity:**

Having announced the incompatibility between Islam and postmodernism, Ziauddin Sardar has proposed a new category which he terms 'transmodernity'. This concept is a developmental form in which Islam combines with certain American and European values, integrating idealistic futurism and technology in a new flexible Muslim society, or, a reconstruction of Muslim civilization<sup>[25]</sup>:

“Prepare yourself for the re-emergence of a dynamic, thriving civilization for Islam. It will not emerge in the near future. It will take several decades, even half a century. It will be deeply rooted in history and tradition, but it will be a very different entity...In developing new interpretations of Islam, and attempting to reform the Shariah, they seek to develop an ethically disciplined vision of the future. It is only through the wise contemplation of the future that Muslims will realize their deepest aspirations – and return, once again, to the enlightened social vision and humane spirit of Islam<sup>[26]</sup>.”

For Sardar, both modernity and postmodernism are not appropriate and suitable philosophies for the future; to free learning from these monolithic and destructive worldviews a new mode of thought is required, a framework which can transcend both modernity and postmodernism. That framework is transmodernity<sup>[27]</sup>. Here the aim is to demonstrate that in a fast growing world present-day Islam, with the outdated thinking prevailing in Muslim societies, is out of sync and incapable of devising new futures. Muslims therefore must recognise the need to initiate change in various processes and phases of diversification. Modern civilization will go on pretending to follow the postmodern approach, under the control of a few people who will not consider diversification of power and will exclude participation from all the levels of society including religious thinkers<sup>[28]</sup>. In his model, Sardar attempts to reinforce his stance valorising a new wave of future-thinking needed to rid Islam of past Muslim civilizations, in contradistinction to postmodern views. Unlike postmodernism, transmodernity considers it extremely important to prepare a blueprint for a future society<sup>[29]</sup>. In suggesting this, however, Sardar is explicit in allowing for continuous evolution and modification in the development of governance, with all rigidity eschewed. Compared to the incompatibility between Islam and postmodernism transmodernity is quite different in that it identifies the need of a futuristic approach rather than finding compatibility between existing approaches. The infinity of the time range is essential<sup>[30]</sup>; Sardar calls for an approach whereby humans would be given authority and control to take actions according to their own needs. He identifies the need for a creative

methodology for driving the affairs of Muslims rather than merely focusing on physical and spiritual purification. He argues that Islamic thought requires special recognition and admits that a revived Islam is needed to prepare for the multi-dimensional challenges and problems of the future society<sup>[31]</sup>.

Sardar has attempted to address the issues of modern Islamic civilization from within its own worldview. Although contemporary Muslim thinkers have conceptualised science and Islam in line with global, social, cultural and political factors, the real situation tends to flag up different views in the context of societal modernisation and cultural modernity. It could be argued that, despite investigating the need to bring about compatibility and consistency between the Western perspectives and Islam, traditional thinkers have critiqued Western science and called upon Muslims to construct a similar level of Islamic concepts necessary for dealing with both the means and ends of science<sup>[32]</sup>. Sardar in his work has described the need for development of cutting edge Islamic science in order to develop a subjective-objective enterprise of normative goals and problems<sup>[33]</sup>. As an alternative to Western science, according to this perspective, Islamic science should be systematic and its principles dictated by the ethical system of Islam. He further states: 'It is a systematic, rigorous pursuit of truth, a rational and objective problem solving enterprise that seeks to understand the whole of Reality. It is holistic and is founded on synthesis'<sup>[34]</sup>.

Sardar has drawn a clear line between Islam and postmodernity and these differences have ultimately resulted in his development of the concept of transmodernity. For this reason, he has regarded Islam as a worldview rather than an ideological programme. He has therefore, separated himself from the existing Islamic regimes<sup>[35]</sup>, according to him, both today's Islam and the West are moving partially towards their own limited goals as Islam in the modern world has lost its universalist impulse. Likewise, Sardar believes the West has also adopted postmodernism as a reincarnation of imperialism<sup>[36]</sup>. For Sardar, the incompatibility between Islam and postmodernism has led to different kinds of distrust between Muslims across the world and the people of other religions such as theological mistrust, experiential mistrust and academic mistrust. People and believers of different religions have started arguing about one another's faiths due to their difference in the level of knowledge<sup>[37]</sup>. These differences have ultimately resulted in frozen and disturbed relationships between Islam and Western religions, specifically Christianity.

Postmodernism is associated with mobility, liberalism, literacy and urbanisation and individualistic understanding of the self<sup>[38]</sup>. Both Islam and postmodernism have been recognised as engaging with modernity but the modernist Islamic intellectuals have adopted comparative approaches in developing association between Islam and the West. On the other hand, some in the West have realised that comparisons are being made between Islamic civilization and Western civilization, and this could highlight a moral decay in the West. Therefore, in a postmodern guise, the West has begun an attempt to deflect the non-Western cultures from their current intellectual thinking<sup>[39]</sup>. Therefore, it is necessary for Muslim intellectuals and thinkers to start to prepare a platform to help Muslims to prepare themselves for the re-emergence of a dynamic and thriving Islamic civilization. However, this outcome will not be observable in the near future - the efforts of Muslims intellectuals will be reaped over a longer term.

Having scrutinised Sardar's thesis on postmodernism and his diagnosis of the problems Islam is currently facing, we might conclude that the position of Islam in the postmodern era has

weakened significantly in his estimation. Islam has lost the essence of its ideological programme by being locked in frozen time-space, with most of the Muslim countries of the world forbidding change or reinterpretation of the Islamic texts and principles, intensifying rigidity and so further alienating 21<sup>st</sup> century human beings. For this reason, in order to deal with the issues of postmodernity Sardar has proffered a unique alternative focusing on transmodernity. According to him, transmodernity offers a coherent understanding of how Western and non-Western cultures can be viewed in combination, dealing with partiality and elements of bias<sup>[40]</sup>. For him, transmodernity is nothing but the transfer of modernity and postmodernism from the edge of chaos to a new order of society<sup>41</sup>. It is related to a search for the integration of various life-enhancing traditions. It permits change and transformation and does not stick to the traditional and orthodox approaches, nor does it concentrate on secularist views. However, it might be argued that Sardar has simply conceived transmodernity as a new form of modernity in respect to its values and lifestyles, where lifestyles are reflective of new cultures. Sardar's alternative is reliant on the axiom that conflict between the Western and non-Western cultures should be avoided for the sake of better outcomes<sup>[42]</sup>.

In comparison with the paradigms of other contemporary thinkers, transmodernity offers support, optimism and hope to the human race. It is unique in that it proffers a planetary vision, an approach that ultimately allows humans to think themselves part of an interconnected and interdependent whole, in the way plants and animals are collectivised into one system<sup>43</sup>. Confirming a similar perspective to Sardar's, Ateljevic<sup>[44]</sup> has proposed the ultimate outcomes of transmodernity will include mutually interdependent growth and the disassembling of the prevailing hierarchies among the different cultures. It should be noted that not only Sardar has objected to postmodernism for leading human beings astray and opening the need for an alternative system. Rifkin<sup>[45]</sup> has stressed,

“If post-modernists razed the ideological walls of modernity and freed the prisoners, they left them with no particular place to go. We became existential nomads, wandering through a boundaryless world full of inchoate longings in a desperate search for something to be attached to and believe in. While the human spirit was freed up from old categories of thought, we are each forced to find our own paths in a chaotic and fragmented world that is even more dangerous than the all-encompassing one we left behind<sup>[46]</sup>.”

Transmodernity therefore emerges as an alternative to modernity and postmodernity, better fitted to cope with the crisis man is passing through and capable of leading the way out of the impasse created by modernity and delivering mankind into another state of being<sup>[47]</sup>.

To conclude it is contended that this paper has surveyed Sardar's rejection of postmodernism for being a continuation of modernity and designed to colonize other cultures ideologically for the sake of its own hegemony. As for as Islam's position within the postmodern complex, we have seen his insistence on both being mutually exclusive and incompatible. He calls for the reinterpretation of the century-old sacred texts and rethinking of Islamic principles to meet the needs of the time. Finally, he presents a vague idea of transmodernity as an alternative for the solution of the problems of modernity/postmodernity. He believes that conflicts between Islam and the Western powers need to be controlled in order to reach effective outcomes and this can be achieved through transmodernity.

## Endnotes:

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- <sup>17</sup> Ibid
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